

YOUR VIEW: Elephants' health has suffered in captivity

By Deborah Robinson

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As the city of New Bedford prepares to tackle the controversial issue of the Buttonwood Park Zoo's proposed expansion, little attention is being paid to the real elephant in the room: enlarging the elephant exhibit. While this may seem like a good thing on the surface, it's not what's best for Buttonwood Park, the zoo, and certainly not for the elephants.

By now everyone knows of the struggle between the zoo and citizens fighting to stop it from seizing Buttonwood Park acreage for a \$13 million "Asia" attraction that would mainly house elephants. What most people don't know is that, once built, the elephant display alone would occupy as much as one-third of the entire zoo. If no park space is used, the elephant exhibit could occupy even more space within the zoo. Either scenario creates an imbalance that would seriously alter the zoo's cherished "Berkshires to the sea" theme and virtually guarantee that the zoo will fight to consume park space for new exhibits in the future.

Why is this happening? Because the zoo insists on displaying a species that, because of its great size and complex social nature, just does not thrive in captivity. The Buttonwood Park Zoo medical records for elephants Emily and Ruth testify to that. Veterinarian Mel Richardson of Paradise, Calif., issued a written review of their records Dec. 6.

Ruth suffers from chronic foot disease and severe arthritis, conditions that result from years of sedentary living in small zoo pens and standing on unnaturally hard surfaces. These ailments are the leading cause of death for elephants in zoos.

Emily has suffered foot disorders and is likely developing arthritis. She also endures a chronic pressure sore on one hip (similar to a bed sore) from lying down indoors on hard flooring rather than on soft soil or grass. Given the physical problems these elephants suffer, it's likely that at least one of them won't live to see a new enclosure.

The records also show that Emily and Ruth don't get along. Emily shows significant aggression toward Ruth; in one incident she bit off more than half a foot of Ruth's tail. Yet the zoo wants to introduce another elephant into this dysfunctional situation, a move that could prove deadly for the ailing Ruth. If knocked down, her arthritic condition may prevent her from getting up again — a sure death sentence for an elephant.

While the zoo's elephant staff may be doing all it can to provide quality care for the elephants, they cannot fully mitigate the problems that captivity creates for these animals — even if the exhibit is expanded. That's no wonder: As the Earth's largest land mammals, elephants need space and plenty of it. They are naturally on the move for 20 hours a day. In contrast, Emily and Ruth are locked in their small barn each night.

Another concern is just how the city plans to pay for the maintenance of more elephants, additional personnel and a larger enclosure. If history is any guide, the elephants' welfare will suffer, just as it did in 2009 when lack of funds prevented the zoo from buying an essential joint supplement for Emily and Ruth, resulting in notably worsened health.

The answer is simple: Emily and Ruth would benefit greatly from retirement to a place where they could spend their golden years enjoying more space and a warmer climate. This good deed would save Buttonwood Park by freeing up space within the zoo. And the millions of dollars that would have been spent to display elephants in a still inadequate enclosure could be used to improve existing animal exhibits and to build on the zoo's unique focus on New England ecology.

It can be a win-win all around. But only if the myopic focus on elephants is replaced with a balanced vision that protects the park, preserves the zoo's unique character, and meets the needs of all of New Bedford's citizens — including Emily and Ruth.

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